

Building the Revolutionary Party? - Geoff Foote

An article by Geoff Foote critically examining the idea of a "revolutionary party". This article was first published by the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists in Libertarian Communist Review #1, and then made available online by [the Struggle.ws website](http://theStruggle.ws).

Since the 1917 Russian Revolution, it has been generally accepted on the left that a revolutionary party, in the sense of a 'van-guard', is necessary for a successful revolution. Anarchist criticism has been shrugged off as coming from a numerically insignificant group of purists, who, unlike the Leninists, have never carried out a successful revolution. However, the denunciation of Stalin by Khruschev, and the crushing of the Hungarian revolt in 1956 (among other things) has made it manifestly clear to all but the most blinkered that the revolution in Russia has been a failure. It might have been thought that Leninism would have been completely discredited, but myths about Stalin have been replaced by myths about Mao or Castro, or in the case of the Trotskyists the myth that the revolution could have been successful, if it had the 'correct' leadership. Leninism, in its Stalinist or Trotskyist forms, remains the dominant ideology of the revolutionary left, partly because the emphasis on authority and leadership is more comprehensible to people raised in an authoritarian society than is the Anarchist rejection of authoritarianism. Anarchism has often gained ground after a revolution, when people resent attempts to reimpose authority on them. But though in the present situation in Britain, the Anarchists are numerically even more insignificant than the Trotskyists, our ideas remain important since they not only raise the question of the nature of post revolutionary society, but also the related problem of how to launch a successful revolution. This is seen above all in the Anarchist rejection of the revolutionary party in its Leninist sense.

The main argument of this article is that the party is the reflection of the society it seeks to create. In looking at the major left groupings - social democratic, Stalinist, Leninist, Trotskyist - there is obviously a certain simplification. For instance, I ignore theories put forward by Gramsci and Luxembourg as well as groupings like the left of the Labour Party (a peculiar amalgam of Methodism, Social Democracy and Stalinism). A lack of space does not allow as complete a discussion of the problem as I would like, and certainly people like Gramsci should not be ignored. However, at this time it is necessary to concentrate on the main party groupings.

1. Social democracy

In bourgeois democratic society the structure of these political parties which support the existing social order - conservative or reformist - are mirrors of a hierarchical authoritarian society. In the same way it can be said that those organisations which seek to transform society in the interests of the working class reflect within their structure the type of society they wish to create. The social democratic party, for example, derives its structure from its attitude towards bourgeois authority. Social democrats seek to create a socialist society on behalf of the working class, but fail to challenge the institutions of bourgeois democracy. Since social democrats accept the authority of the bourgeois state and law, they become agents of that authority. They make the mistake of assuming that the state stands above the class conflict, to be captured at elections by the representatives of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. In fact the State is in the midst of the class struggle, operating as the armed wing of the ruling class. This can be seen not only in this country, but also in other European Social Democratic parties (e.g.. the French socialists under Mollet sent troops on an imperialist expedition to Suez in 1956 - and justified it in Marxist terms. The German social democrats have a long history of acting as instruments of bourgeois authority, from their suppression of the Spartakist revolt to their support for the West German emergency laws). The contradictions of social democracy - a result of its attitude to authority - resolve themselves into the position of undermining the revolutionary potential of the working class.

The social democratic vision of a new society - essentially same as the old one in all respects but with the exception that the people are ruled with a beneficial paternalism which will end inequalities - is mirrored in its organisational structure. The leadership is a small bureaucracy running a mass party. The most important section of the leadership - the parliamentary party - is completely out of control of the mass organisation. Nominations for parliamentary candidature must be approved by the leadership. In Britain, the Labour Party group which draws up policies for the next election (the National Executive Committee) is elected by non mandated conference delegates, and is thus out of control of the membership. When left wing policies are forward they are ignored (e.g.. Gaitskell over CND in 1960 and Wilson during and after government office). The mass membership of the party has all the abstract freedoms of bourgeois society - freedom of speech, freedom to hold radically different ideas etc., - so that Trotskyist 'entrists' like the Revolutionary Socialist League can co-exist with rightists like Woodrow Wyatt (and millionaire capitalists like Robert Maxwell) without upsetting the party. The parallels with bourgeois society are made complete by the fact that as soon as 'subversive' groups begin to pose a serious threat, as did the Communist Party in the 20's or the SLL in the 60'; they are expelled en masse. Of course this does not mean that social democratic parties are any more free of mass pressures than are the ruling class. They need to win elections, and are often driven to absurd promises, like calling for a price freeze in a capitalist society caught in the throes of international inflation - a policy made more absurd and phoney by the fact that it is proposed by Wilson and Callaghan, instigators of the 1966 wage freeze. We can see from this that the institutionalised formal democracy of social democratic parties - a form without any substance - is a mirror of the social democrat's vision of socialism as a bourgeois society without the bourgeoisie.

2. The Stalinist parties

Unlike the social democrats the Stalinists (and I do not count the British CP as Stalinist but as left social democrat) seek to challenge bourgeois authority. However, they do not do so in the interests of democratic liberty, but in the interests of an opposing authority which claims to be more efficient than the bourgeoisie. Capitalist 'anarchy' will be replaced by bureaucratic planning which will end bourgeois exploitation and inequality of distribution. The Stalinist view of a socialist society - a bureaucratic State on the model of the USSR, with a monolithic ideology, where a small leadership dictates policy to the masses, - is reflected in the structure of the Stalinist parties. Because of its historic origins in Leninism, the party is committed to democratic centralism but real democracy is absent, because of the banning of factions, and the demand that the membership must submit completely to the policies worked out in the Central Committee. The Stalinists' subjection to the need to defend Russia often leads to a situation where it can be revolutionary (eg. the big strike called by the Communists in France and Italy in 1947/48) or, more usually, counter-revolutionary (eg. Stalinist opposition to the Spanish revolution of 1936, their attitude to the May revolt in France in 1968). The contradictions of Stalinism attempting to change society are no less great than those of social democracy.

3. Lenin's concept of the party

Unlike social democracy and Stalinism, Leninism seeks to challenge bourgeois authority in the name of revolutionary freedom. Lenin in 'State and Revolution' called for a society where the State - defined as an instrument of class oppression - would eventually disappear. The paradox emerges when a Leninist government suppressed freedom and smashed the attempt of the Russian working class to free itself from rulers. This paradox is made clear only if we keep in mind that the revolutionary party is a reflection of the social order it seeks to create. It is significant that Chris Harman should write that: "It is important to note that for Lenin the party is not the embryo of the workers' state."[1](#), while at the same time attributing the failure of the Russian revolution to the fact that it took place in a non-industrialised country racked by Civil War and international bourgeois intervention, While nobody can underestimate the tremendous consequences of such 'external' factors it would be completely

misleading to ignore 'internal' factors such as the Leninist theory of the Party and the relationship between the party and the working class.

Lenin's theory of the party is derived from his view of the nature of revolution and the role of revolutionaries. Revolution, Lenin correctly saw, is of necessity authoritarian. As Engels wrote: "A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is: it is an act whereby one part of the population imposes its will on the other by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon all of which are highly authoritarian means."[2](#) (This does not mean of course that a revolution cannot be the most liberating thing there is). From this arises the idea that a transitional regime - the dictatorship of the proletariat - is needed to smash any attempt by the bourgeoisie to destroy the revolution. The role of the revolutionary party in this situation is the role of political leadership of the working class. "There could not have been social democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without...the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade union consciousness"[3](#). Lenin later modified this position to take account of the undeniable spontaneity of the class. ("The economists have gone to one extreme. To straighten matters out one had to pull in the other direction, and this is what I have done"[4](#). Lenin often pointed out that the proletariat was sometimes more revolutionary than the party. But the primary role of creating consciousness lies in the party: "The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by social democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness."[5](#) Leadership is absolutely necessary for revolutionary success because of the fragmentation of consciousness and the organisation of the ruling class. But the nature of this leadership is more than mere persuasion and raising of consciousness. Such leadership is inevitable in any situation where many people are confused because they have never thought about the issues and listen to someone who has - who is in that sense a leader. An organisation which seeks to link local struggles and explain a future course is, whether we like it or not, necessary. But the Leninist party is not only concerned with ideological leadership. It seeks political leadership of the State, since the proletariat, unlike a democratic centralist party, does not necessarily have the 'concrete view' even after a revolution. Even in his most 'libertarian' text Lenin writes: "By educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and leading the whole people to socialism"[6](#) Lenin later explains the reason for this vanguard of the proletariat: "We are not Utopians, we do not dream of disposing at once with all administration, with all subordination.... No, we want the socialist revolution with subordination, control and foremen and accountants."[7](#) Any notion of self emancipation and self education is missing in Lenin. Realising the strength of the authoritarian culture he attacks and underestimates the speed with which many people overthrow authoritarian ideology in a revolutionary situation. He fails to see that "... if the proletariat itself does not know how to create the necessary prerequisites for the socialist organisation of labour, no one can do this for it and no one can compel it to do this.. Socialism and socialist organisation will be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all. Something else will be set up - State capitalism"[8](#).

4. Leninist substitutionism

Just as in the transitional regime of 'proletarian' dictatorship the hierarchy of authority and subordination remains, so in the party there is in the Central Committee and its policies. There is a hierarchy of authority. District and factory circles, local and territorial committees are elected and their decisions are then communicated from the top down. Opposition from the subordinates is quashed, or at best tolerated. In Russia the Left Communists were hounded out of existence in 1918. From the Democratic Centralists and the Workers' Opposition were frowned upon, and eventually, in 1921, after a party Congress which oppositionists claimed had rigged delegations, all factions were banned within the party (like most permanent bans, this was 'temporary'). The Cheka was then used against the oppositionists forced to illegally [operate underground?]. Trotsky summed up Leninist ideas vividly in 1924 when he said: "...the Party in the last analysis is always right, because the Party is the single historical instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its basic problems... I know that one must not be right against the party. One can be right only with the Party, and through the Party for

history has no other road for being in the right."[9](#) Ironically it was Trotsky himself who, in 1904 had pointed out the danger of such ideas. Before he became a Leninist he [said?] in a polemic against Leninist views of the Party: " The organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole, when the central committee itself for the organisation, and finally the dictator substitutes himself for the central committee."[10](#)

This substitutionism in the party was reflected in the society the Bolsheviks - created. The rule of the party (or rather, its Central Committee) was substituted for the rule of the proletariat. The workers' committees running industry were castrated in 1917-1918 (before the civil war, the devastating effects of which are the constant excuse for Trotskyist and Stalinist apologists) in preparation for one man management. By the summer of 1918 elections to the Soviets had become a farce. In 1918 the Red Army, originally a democratic militia, was transformed by Trotsky into a non-democratic army on the bourgeois model, with saluting, different living quarters for officers, the death penalty for desertion etc.. In 1920 Trotsky (supported at first by Lenin) called for the militarisation of labour - labour armies to be used as scabs - and the substitution of Party controlled production unions for genuine Trade Unions. The nature of the Party after 1914 (when it was broadened by many who agreed with Lenin only on the need to turn the imperialist war into a civil war) meant that these proposals came under fire from a significant minority (and in the case of the militarisation of labour possibly a majority). But as we have seen this opposition, and even the right to organise opposition, was effectively ended with the 1921 Party Congress.

Thus the original paradox, that Leninism, a doctrine calling for revolutionary freedom destroyed that freedom, can be seen not to be a paradox at all. Lenin's talk of proletarian democracy, and freedom from authority in 'State and Revolution' remained just that - talk. By removing such notions to a vague future, Lenin banished them to the realm of abstraction. What remained was the immediate task of overthrowing capitalism and establishing a transitional regime. Bourgeois authority was not challenged by the authority of a revolutionary proletariat (which alone would have laid the real preconditions for the abolition of authoritarianism) but by the authority of a political party - self proclaimed 'vanguard of the proletariat'. Precisely because, as one prominent Left Communist proclaimed "socialism and socialist organisation will be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all", the 'transitional' regime of 1917/18 remains with us today, more powerful than ever.

5. The Trotskyist attitude

The Trotskyist never learned anything from failure of the Russian revolution. Trotsky himself was never to make more than a partial break with the USSR., and was led into the contradictory position of defining Russia as a degenerated workers' state. Leninist organisation with its hierarchies, its authoritarianism and its notions of leadership and subordination remained. "The leading cadre plays the same decisive role in relation to party that the party plays in relation to the class"[11](#) writes Cannon, leader of the largest of the American Trotskyist groups, the Socialist Workers' party. There is the same intolerance to opposition: "Those who try to break up the historically created cadre of the Trotskyist parties are in reality aiming to break up the parties and to liquidate the Trotskyist movement. They will not succeed. The Trotskyist parties will liquidate the liquidators, and the SWP has the high historic privilege of setting the example."[12](#) These are the madmen that claim to be our leaders! The authoritarian structure of the parties is a reflection of the society they seek to create. Another Trotskyist leader, Ernest Mandel, writes: "Anyone who believes that the mass of the imperialist countries are ready today to take over the running of the economy at once, without first passing through the school of workers' control is deceiving himself and others with dangerous illusions."[13](#) More explicitly he writes: "The production relations are not changed so long as the private employer has merely been replaced by the employer state, embodied in some all power manager, technocrat or bureaucrat.... The classical solution is the succession of phases: workers' control (i.e. supervision of the management by the workers), workers participation in the management; and

workers self -management."[14](#) Like Lenin, the Trotskyists wish democracy and freedom away to a vague future 'when the workers are ready for it'. They also reduce it to an abstraction.

6. Leninism - the I.S. variant

The one revolutionary group in Britain which seemed to many to have learned the lessons of the failure of the Russian revolution, and attempted to be both Leninist and libertarian, was the International Socialists.*[WM note - This group is now the Socialist Workers Party]* Their emphasis on democracy within the party is shown in a book by three of their most prominent members - Party and Class. Here Duncan Hallas writes that a revolutionary party cannot possibly be created except on a thoroughly democratic basis, that unless in its internal life vigorous tendencies and shades of opinion are represented, a socialist party cannot rise above the level of a sect. "Internal democracy is not an optional extra. It is fundamental to the relationship between party members and those amongst whom they work."[15](#) In the same book Tony Cliff writes: "because the working class is far from being monolithic, and because the path to socialism is uncharted, wide differences of strategy and tactics can and should exist in the revolutionary party. The alternative is the bureaucratised party or the sect with its leader... Scientific socialism must live and thrive on controversy".[16](#) It seems odd that such democratic sentiments should co-exist with a total support for the Bolshevik practice during the Russian revolution. Even those members of I.S. who, like Peter Sedgewick argued that the degeneration of the revolution had occurred by 1918, attribute the decay to the "military depredation and economic ruin which wrought havoc in an already enfeebled Russia."[17](#) No mention of the Leninist view of the Party. Libertarian socialism and Leninism are incompatible - and the I.S. group has remained Leninist, and we have recently begun to see the results.

The stress on democracy within the group has been exposed as hollow. As early as 1971, the I.S. leadership reversed a national conference decision that the group should take a principled abstentionist position on Britain's entry into the E.E.C. Instead, they adopted a position of opposition to entry. The way in which the opposition groups like Workers Fight and the "Right Opposition" were expelled is startling in view of the groups previous emphasis on faction rights. Tony Cliff has abandoned his earlier position in "Party and Class" that "wide differences in strategy and tactics can and should exist in the revolutionary party"[18](#), and now holds that "I.S. is a voluntary organisation of people who disagree or agree within narrow limits"[19](#).

The libertarian rhetoric of a society based on workers' councils remains, but it is nothing more than a rhetoric. Certain questions are never raised, let alone answered. Will the factories be under workers' self-management during the 'transitional period'? Will the Workers' State be a federation of workers' councils, under the direct control of the working class (a libertarian idea) or will it be a centralised bureaucracy co-existing with workers councils on the Yugoslav model (a Leninist idea)? What happens if there is a conflict between the centralised authority and the workers' councils? (When such a conflict occurred in Russia in 1917/18 and in Spain 1936/37 it was the councils who lost out). Above all, what will be the relationships of the vanguard party to the State, the Workers' Councils, and the working class? How will it avoid substitutionism? Cliff's argument in 'Party and Class' that substitutionism can be stopped by a diligent leadership is completely inadequate.

7. The Libertarian position

Nobody denies that the condition for revolution in Britain will be different from those that prevailed in Russia. However, the idea of a vanguard party remains, as does the danger that the "transitional period" will prove far from transitional. The idea that the working class can be liberated by a party - no matter how correct its line - is an abstraction. All that would happen would be the creation of a new ruling class, as has been seen in Russia and other "socialist" countries. The working class must liberate itself, as called for by Marx, and in doing so it will create the preconditions for the liberation of all oppressed groups from authority.

Our relationship to Leninist theory must be made clear. Leninism has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. Its recognition that working class consciousness is fragmented and generally under the

hold of bourgeois ideology is essentially correct. While he underestimates how quickly workers can free themselves from authoritarian ideology, Lenin did recognise the importance of leadership. Anarchists must overcome their fear of the idea of leadership, and recognise that in any situation where people are confused, an anarchist will provide leadership where he or she advocates libertarian solutions. The difference is that whereas anarchist leadership consists of persuasion and agitation, the Leninist vanguard party seeks to go beyond agitation to actual political leadership through its control of the state. For the purpose of agitation on a national scale some type of organisation is necessary, and here also Leninism should be looked at more carefully. Lenin saw that the organisation of the party was determined by the authoritarian society in which it existed (though he did not see that the structure of a vanguard party determined the society which it created), and tried to solve the problem by adopting democratic centralism. Democratic centralism is suited for a vanguard party, but libertarianism must reject such a form of organisation which usually turns out to be more centralised than democratic. What is needed is an organisation with a high degree of theoretical clarity and a fully developed sense of responsibility towards other comrades, while at the same time maintaining a maximum of political discussion within the organisation. A central co-ordinating body is vital, though there must be complete and absolute control over it by the membership and its task should be minimal and clearly defined. Some anarchists have criticised Lenin for his ruthlessness, but I believe that such a criticism should be rejected. Any successful revolution will be faced with the possibility of civil war and tremendous economic difficulties which it will be forced to meet ruthlessly if the revolution is to survive. In doing this it may be necessary to do some horrifying things such as killing ordinary workers who are fighting for the counter-revolution. But there will be qualitative differences between the libertarian and the Leninist attitudes. We are fighting for different aims, and so must reject policies like creating a secret police, prison camps and "red terror". Such policies would destroy revolutionary freedom. We must be prepared to accept defeat rather than engage in such actions.

Finally, we must recognise with Lenin that authority can only be defeated by authority. Lenin recognised that the State is an instrument of coercion by one class against another, and pointed out that a Workers' State will be necessary in the turmoil of revolution in order to coerce the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, we must differentiate ourselves from Lenin's view of the State. To Lenin the state was a centralised republic co-existing with workers' councils, with the vanguard party controlling the centre. To libertarians, it is a decentralised federation of workers' councils under the direct and absolute control of the working class. Such a state is one that begins to cease being a state almost immediately. It is not the institutionalisation of class oppression like the Leninist state, but the foundations of liberation. Since the concept of a workers' state is now fully associated with Leninism, and it is thereby simplified to become merely class oppression rather than being simultaneously the institutions of liberation, which necessitates the dissolution of the state anarchists reject the [idea that?] revolutionary society will have a state in its initial phase.

One thing we must reject clearly is the notion of a centralised vanguard party. The division of labour between those who rule and those who are ruled has lasted too long, and can only be ended by the self-emancipation of the working class. It is absolutely necessary that anarchists clarify their relationship to this self-emancipation, and the debate on organisation within the libertarian movement must develop in a clear and realistic direction.

by Geoff Foote

- [1. Chris Harman - Party and Class.](#)
- [2. Engels - On Authority.](#)
- [3. Lenin - What is to be done](#)
- [4. Lenin - Second Congress of the R.S.D.L.P.](#)
- [5. Lenin - The Re-organisation of the Party.](#)

- [6.Lenin - The State and Revolution.](#)
- [7.ibid.](#)
- [8.Osinsky - On the building of Socialism in Kommunist](#)
- [9.Trotsky - Thirteenth Party Congress.](#)
- [10.Trotsky - Our Political Tasks.](#)
- [11.James Cannon - Factional Struggle and Party Leadership, in S.W.P. pamphlet In defence of the Revolutionary Party.](#)
- [12.Ibid](#)
- [13.Mandel - Workers Control and Workers Councils.](#)
- [14.Mandel - Marxist Economic Theory. Vol. 2](#)
- [15.Duncan Hallas Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party in Party and Class](#)
- [16.Tony Cliff - Trotsky on Substitutionism in Party and Class.](#)
- [17.Peter Sedgwick - Victor Serge on Party and Class in International Socialism 50.](#)
- [18.Tony Cliff - Party and Class.](#)
- [19.Cliff and Naglaiti - Main features of the programme we need in I.S. Internal Bulletin Jan 1973.](#)